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RUEHDK/AMEMBASSY DAKAR 0159  
RUEHDBU/AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE 0476  
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 4200  
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 2479  
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 0512  
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 1145  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TASHKENT 000585

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/CEN AND DRL

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TAGS: PHUM KIRF PGOV PREL UZ

SUBJECT: UZBEKISTAN: HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH DIRECTOR DENIED ACCREDITATION; AMCIT RABBI GIVEN REPRIEVE ON DEPORTATION

REF: TASHKENT 517

Classified By: POLOFF R. FITZMAURICE FOR REASONS 1.4 (B, D)

¶1. (C) Summary: One week before planned visits by Ambassador-at-Large for Religious Freedom John Hanford and Assistant Secretary Richard Boucher, the Uzbek government, with its usual perfect timing, denied accreditation to Human Rights Watch's director in Tashkent and threatened to deport an AmCit Rabbi, whose accreditation was originally denied on April 1. After a last minute intervention by the Foreign Minister, the Rabbi was granted a reprieve and allowed to remain in Uzbekistan. The modestly positive outcome on the Rabbi suggests that there may be hope for turning the Uzbeks around on accreditation for the Human Rights Watch director. End summary.

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH DIRECTOR DENIED ACCREDITATION

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¶2. (C) The Justice Ministry rejected accreditation for Human Rights Watch director Igor Vorontsov, who reopened HRW's Tashkent office and originally applied for accreditation in February. On May 21, poloff spoke by telephone with Vorontsov, a Russian citizen who is currently at home in Saint Petersburg. Vorontsov explained that HRW's headquarters in New York was informed of the decision on May 20 via a letter forwarded to them by the Uzbek Embassy in Washington. The terse letter, dated May 8 and signed by Deputy Justice Minister H.M. Isakov, reportedly stated that the Ministry "did not see a basis" upon which to grant Vorontsov accreditation, as he allegedly lacked "sufficient experience," was not familiar with "the mentality of the people of the region," and "was not equipped to understand the changes and reforms happening in the socio-economic and socio-political fields" of Uzbekistan.

¶3. (C) The government similarly refused to grant accreditation to HRW's last remaining expatriate staff member in July 2007, forcing the organization to effectively close, although it remains registered in Uzbekistan. On May 20, MFA

America's Section Chief Mamajanov told the Ambassador that the government would still consider granting accreditation to another (and in their eyes more suitable candidate) candidate for HRW director in Tashkent (Comment: By denying accreditation to Vorontsov without revoking HRW's registration in Uzbekistan, the Uzbeks of course might be trying to have it both ways - to make it impossible for the organization to operate in practice while being able to say that they have not formally expelled them. End comment.)

DIRECTOR STILL MAY RETURN TO TASHKENT

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¶ 14. (C) Before his accreditation was rejected, Vorontsov had planned to return to Uzbekistan in the next days. As a Russian citizen, Vorontsov does need not a visa (or accreditation) to return to Uzbekistan, and he noted that the Uzbek government had no legal means to bar his reentry into the country. However, Vorontsov said that he would wait and see over the next few days to see how things developed before making a final decision on whether to return or not. Coincidentally, Uzbek Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyaev signed a decree on May 19 which toughened regulations for foreigners staying in Uzbekistan and made it easier for the government to deport them.

AMCIT RABBI THREATENED WITH DEPORTATION

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¶ 15. (C) In a second batch of recent bad news on the human

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rights front, the Israeli Ambassador informed the Ambassador on May 20 that Rabbi David Gurevich, a dual American-Israeli citizen whose accreditation and visa expired on April 1 (reftel), was called in by the police on May 19 and shown a letter (most likely from the Justice Ministry) dated March 31, demanding that he leave the country within 24 hours. No explanation was given for why the letter was not delivered sooner. After some negotiation, the police agreed to give Gurevich one week to leave the country. After the meeting with the Israeli Ambassador, the Ambassador told MFA America's Section Chief Mamajanov that on the eve of visits by Ambassador-at-Large for Religious Freedom John Hanford and Assistant Secretary Boucher, it would be inconsistent with Uzbekistan's positive record on anti-Semitism and incomprehensible in political terms for Gurevich to be thrown out of the country on essentially technical grounds. Mamajanov said he would bring the case to Foreign Minister Norov's attention.

RABBI GRANTED LAST MINUTE REPRIEVE BY FOREIGN MINISTER

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¶ 16. (C) On May 21, the Israeli Ambassador reported that Ministry of Interior (MVD) officials detained Gurevich on the evening of May 20. The Ambassador immediately informed Mamajanov of our deep concern and desire for consular access.

On May 21, the MVD released Gurevich, who planned to depart Uzbekistan later the same day with his wife. However, the Israeli Ambassador later told the Ambassador that Foreign Minister Norov intervened at the last minute, allowing Gurevich to stay in Uzbekistan for the time being. Gurevich was reportedly also told that the "technical issues" surrounding his status will be eventually resolved.

COMMENT

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¶ 17. (C) With the upcoming visits next week by Ambassador-at-Large for Religious Freedom John Hanford and Assistant Secretary Richard Boucher, the government's decisions to deny HRW director Vorontsov accreditation and threaten Rabbi Gurevich with deportation could not have come at a possibly worst time. As usual, the Uzbeks are their own worst enemies. Nevertheless, the outcome on Gurevich

suggests it is possible to bring political realities home to the Uzbeks, and gives us hope that we may be able to turn their decision around on Vorontsov, if we can persuade them that allowing an independent voice to operate will enhance their claims that human rights are gradually improving.

NORLAND